

Community resources

[Follow us on Twitter](#) [Check our Reddit](#) [Twitter this](#) [Digg this page](#) [Contact us on IRC](#)

courage is contagious

Viewing cable 08SANJOSE629, COSTA RICA COZYING UP TO CUBA?

If you are new to these pages, please read an introduction on the [structure of a cable](#) as well as how to [discuss them](#) with others. See also the [FAQs](#)

Understanding cables

Every cable message consists of three parts:

- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
- The bottom box presents the body of the cable. The opening can contain a more specific subject, references to other cables ([browse by origin](#) to find them) or additional comment. This is followed by the main contents of the cable: a summary, a collection of specific topics and a comment section.

To understand the justification used for the classification of each cable, please use this [WikiSource](#) article as reference.

Discussing cables

If you find meaningful or important information in a cable, please link directly to its unique reference number. Linking to a specific paragraph in the body of a cable is also possible by copying the appropriate link (to be found at the paragraph symbol). Please mark messages for social networking services like Twitter with the hash tags **#cablegate** and a hash containing the reference ID e.g. **#08SANJOSE629**.

Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
08SANJOSE629	2008-07-30 19:48	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy San Jose

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-11/Investigacion/NotasDestacadas/Investigacion2710281.aspx>

<http://www.nacion.com/2011-03-11/Investigacion/NotaPrincipal/Investigacion2710282.aspx>

VZCZCXYZ0000

PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHSJ #0629/01 2121948

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 301948Z JUL 08

FM AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9965

INFO RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHCV/AMEMBASSY CARACAS PRIORITY 1128

RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0046

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN JOSE 000629

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA, WHA/CEN AND WHA/CCA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/30/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [CS](#) [CU](#)

SUBJECT: COSTA RICA COZYING UP TO CUBA?

REF: A. SAN JOSE 432

[1](#)B. 06 SAN JOSE 1841

[1](#)C. 07 SAN JOSE 1106

[1](#)D. SAN JOSE 129

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The Arias administration may be contemplating re-establishing diplomatic ties with Cuba. A vocal embargo opponent in the legislature (a member of President Arias' own party) seems to have Arias' ear on the issue, arguing that normalized relations would help open Cuba to democracy. FonMin Stagno has signaled to local diplomats that a change is being considered. The GOCR Consul in Havana emailed a local Cuba-watcher a month ago that ties were "getting closer." A leading editorial writer told us July 24 that he is convinced a change is in the wind (and overdue, in his view).

¶2. (C) The chatter here has been sporadic but persistent: an opening with Cuba, explained as a move to force the Castro regime to democratize faster, might be just the sort of sweeping international gesture Arias is looking for in the last half of his administration. Such a move would burnish his credentials with the international (and Costa Rican) intellectual left; allow him to respond to critics who say he has been too close to the U.S. during the bruising two-year fight to ratify and implement CAFTA; and place him back on the global stage. On the other hand, a drastic reversal in Cuba policy might be a tough sell domestically, given Arias' record of vocal criticism of the regime in Havana. Talk of a Cuba gambit has quieted over the last two weeks, perhaps because of our recent and widespread soundings on the issue, but there is still a hum in the background. Given the Arias' administration's penchant for dramatic, no-notice foreign policy moves (moving the GOCR Embassy from Jerusalem to Tel Aviv, recognizing China, establishing relations with the Palestinian "state," etc.), if a change towards Cuba comes, it may be sudden.

END SUMMARY.

WHAT'S THE BUZZ?

¶3. (C) There has been some political and media buzz about possible GOCR overtures to Cuba over the last 2-3 months, coinciding with Fidel's failing health and fade from power. During a luncheon with Poloffs in early June, legislator Federico Tinoco (PLN), strongly pro-US and one of the May 21 Cuban Solidarity Day speakers (Ref A), (but also strongly anti-embargo), floated the idea of a Costa Rican opening to Cuba. Tinoco intimated that he was shopping the idea informally around San Jose and in the GOCR. His rationale: 1) All other countries in Latin America had relations with Cuba and Costa Rica was a lone holdout; 2) Now that Costa Rica had opened relations with China (to very little domestic or international hue and cry), why not open up to Cuba?; 3) Costa Rica already had fairly extensive informal relations with Cuba, including some 10,000 Cubans in the country (news to us); and 4) Costa Rica's re-establishing relations would help further democracy in Cuba. Tinoco maintained that the idea was more to help the Cuban people than to challenge U.S. policy.

¶4. (C) Tinoco's musing reminded us of an earlier conversation in May with Elaine White, former advisor to the Minister and then Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs during the Pacheco administration (1998-2002). She told us that during her tenure at the MFA, GOCR foreign policy rested on three sacred pillars: 1) recognition of Taiwan, 2) maintaining an embassy in Jerusalem, and 3) not having ties with Cuba. White noted that Arias and Stagno had already reversed the first two (Refs B-C). She added that the GOCR could not use "human rights" as the reason for distancing itself from Cuba, having recognized the PRC despite the latter's abysmal human rights record, and she pondered whether that would pave the way for

a return to full GOCR-Cuban diplomatic relations.

15. (SBU) On June 24, during an MFA overview briefing to senior members of the diplomatic corps, Stagno answered a point-blank question about relations with Cuba from the Russian Ambassador by saying that the GOCR was open to talk to the Cubans and did so from time to time, but that nothing "formal" was in the works.

THE CUBA WATCHERS ARE WATCHING

16. (C) With Tinoco's and White's reasoning on our minds, and the Cuba buzz continuing in the background, we canvassed some contacts in and outside of government. Adriana Nunez, Cuban-born and -exiled PLN faction press chief in the legislature, who has had her finger on the pulse of Cuban issues here, told us on July 15 that the GOCR Consul in Havana, Jose Maria Penebad, visited San Jose about a month before for medical reasons but stayed on for consultations with the MFA. After his return to Havana, Penebad wrote Nunez from his personal email account to tell her that ties were "getting closer." Nunez believes the GOCR would make such a move sooner rather than later, with the uneventful opening to China the likely turning point in the Arias Team's thinking. She said that President Arias had never had much of an internal "discourse" on Cuba, except to say that he would not re-engage with Cuba while Fidel was in power. With Raul now in control, Arias may have an out, according to Nunez.

17. (C) Nunez said that several of Arias' advisors have been encouraging him to re-establish full ties and that the MFA may have been deliberating doing so since late 2007. She based this on a couple of indicators. First, after the Cuban consul in San Jose vocally criticized Arias during last year's CAFTA debate and October referendum, Havana replaced the consul. Second, toward the end of last year, a group of legislators took an official complaint they prepared regarding a Cuban political prisoner to the MFA to forward to Geneva. When the "denuncia" made its way "upstairs" to the FonMin's desk, it was stopped and the MFA said it could not get involved. Nunez took this as a sign that the MFA did not want to be seen by Havana as participating in the complaint. She also noted that earlier this year the GOCR announced it was going to "shortly" establish diplomatic relations with a Caribbean country and a country in the Middle East. (NOTE: Aside from the quirky recognition of the "state" of Palestine, Ref D, there have been no new diplomatic ties established by the GOCR thus far in 2008.)

18. (C) According to Nunez, Arias would most likely couch a re-establishment of ties in terms of contributing to the opening of Cuban democracy; showing solidarity with the other Latin American countries; and expanding the benefits of cultural/educational/professional exchanges. Costa Rica already benefits from large numbers of Cuban doctors, many of whom work in the Costa Rican national health system. Though Arias is known for his large ego and his role as a peace-broker, both Nunez and think-tank member Constantino Urcuyo doubted that Arias would try to insert himself as a mediator between the U.S. and Havana, in regards to the embargo, for example. Urcuyo said Arias' motivation would be something "more simple," possibly -- as Nunez and Urcuyo both indicated -- another attempt to re-burnish his credentials with Costa Rican leftists. (COMMENT: Urcuyo also mused on the possible impact of the GOCR's Petrocaribe membership (septel) on ties with Cuba. Would Chavez push San Jose closer to Havana? END COMMENT.) Nunez believes that the GOCR will strike quickly whenever it changes policy towards Cuba. She bases this (with justification) on the Arias administration's surprise announcements about the embassy in Israel and recognition of China.

BACKING OFF THE BUZZ, FOR NOW

¶9. (C) The Cuba buzz has quieted recently, but has not died altogether. In mid-July, French Ambassador Jean-Paul Monchau told the DCM that he had asked Stagno directly about the GOCR normalizing relations with Cuba. Stagno admitted they had been working on it, telling Monchau that the GOCR had cooled to the idea after the Cubans "insulted" the Europeans and started going after dissidents again. On July 21, we asked legislator Evita Arguedas (Independent, married to a Cuban exile) whether she had heard anything definite about a normalization of relations. She told us she had also heard chatter, but nothing definitive. She did not discount the idea, however, and stated that "where there is talk, there is a reason."

¶10. (C) Other leading legislators including PLN faction Chief Oscar Nunez and PUSC faction chief Lorena Vasquez told us they have heard nothing from the Executive on changes vis-a-vis Cuba, but both acknowledged the Arias administration would not necessarily inform or consult the legislature in advance, based on the China example. Both also opined that it might be a tough sell for Arias domestically, given the Costa Rican people's strong support of human rights and (as Vasquez put it) general dislike for Cubans. Ever the PLN loyalist, Oscar Nunez was confident the Costa Rican people would follow Arias' lead in the end. "If they trust him on anything, it is on foreign policy," he said.

¶11. (C) On July 22, we followed up with Adriana Nunez who had asked Rodrigo Arias, Minister of the Presidency, by email if the GOCR was planning to re-establish ties. According to Nunez, Arias responded that it was "within the realm of possibilities" but he indicated that the matter had been "paralyzed" for now due to "other problems." (COMMENT: We assume this refers to the local scandal involving possible unethical government use of BCIE funds, which has been occupying a great deal of space in the local press, and perhaps the new membership in Petrocaribe. END COMMENT.)

¶12. (C) At the MFA, both Antonio Alarcon, Stagno's Chief of Staff, and Alejandro Solano, Deputy Director of Foreign Policy, had heard nothing about a prospective change in Cuba policy. Neither could foresee relations being normalized in the next two years, and Alarcon also noted the possible political difficulties in selling a change in policy to the Costa Rican public. However, recalling the way the China decision was handled, Alarcon promised there would be "no surprises" to the USG should the GOCR open to Cuba; the MFA would let us know in advance.

¶13. (C) In a long, private conversation with us on July 18, Tinoco himself seemed to have backed off. At first he did not want to talk about the issue (convincing us that he had indeed been pushing for relations with Cuba). He then reprised his early arguments about Latin American solidarity, the moderate reaction to establishing ties to China, and the hoped-for positive Costa Rican influence on the regime. Pushing back firmly, we noted that Cuba is not China, and that Costa Rica is not like all other Latin American countries: Havana would turn full Costa Rican relations into an endorsement and a reward, long before appropriate and sufficient democratic changes had been made. We added that even the EU had established benchmarks for improved behavior by the regime. We concluded that an opening to Cuba by Arias now, with Petrocaribe in the works and following the president's critical comments about the U.S. in Iraq and the lack of USG assistance and attention to the region, might be hard to explain to Washington. We also cautioned Tinoco not to expect wholesale, immediate changes in USG Cuba policy should a Democratic administration be elected in November.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) We have not heard the last word on this.

Paraphrasing legislator Evita Arguedas, where there is this much smoke, there is probably a little fire. On July 24, Armando Gonzalez, editorial page chief of leading daily "La Nacion" told us that he is convinced a change remains in the wind (and is long overdue). At an appropriate moment, establishing full diplomatic ties with Cuba might be just the sort of sweeping international gesture Arias seeks in the last half of his administration, to place him back on the world stage, burnish his leftist credentials and allow him to show some distance from Washington. It would make more sense for him to postpone such a significant policy shift until after CAFTA implementation in October and the U.S. elections in November, but he may be tempted to move sooner.

BRENNAN